

Mr. Botsford

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Francis Donovan

Thomaston, Conn.

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Mr. Botsford is pottering about his kitchen stove as I knock on the door. He turns to see who his caller is and bids me enter without leaving his stove.

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"Sit down, sit down," he says. "Make yourself to home. I'm fixin' myself a nice pot of sauerkraut. Be ready about this time tomorrow. I leave 'er simmer about 36 hours. That's the way to cook sauerkraut. And boy I want to tell you, you got something!

"All I'd have to do now would be to drop a hint to Charley Hinkley that I got some sauerkraut up here and he'd show up lickin' his chops, bright and early tomorrow. He likes sauerkraut. And he likes the way I cook it."

Mr. Botsford takes a last look at his sauerkraut, bending down the better to enjoy the full-bodied aroma that arises from the pot, then sits down in his Morris chair and lights his pipe.

"I was listenin' to the radio last night," he says. "Heard an old trapper talkin' about his adventures. Got me thinkin' about Hen Smith, the carpenter, used to live down the street. Hen was great for huntin' and trappin'. Used to spend all his spare time in the woods.

"Why I'm tellin' you this, I heard on some program on the radio -- I can't remember just what one -- that woodchucks won't climb trees. Now I know that ain't so. I've seen 'em. I was walkin' up near the Four Corners one day, when I heard a dog barkin' over in the bushes and a lot of commotion. I went over towards the noise and I come upon 2 Hen Smith and his dog. The dog was just finishin' off a woodchuck.

"Hen told me that a woodchuck had clim' a/ little tree and he had to poke him down so's the dog would get him. There was the tree, all scratched from the woodchuck's claws, and there was a big long stick that Hen had whittled to poke him out of it. I guess that's evidence enough, ain't it, I never see it before and I never see it since.

"Foxes, now, they'll climb trees quite often. They'll run up an apple tree, if there's one handy, to throw the, dogs off the scent. When the dogs run past, they'll come down and run in the other direction. Foxes are one of the cleverest animals they is.

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"How do you suppose they know that dogs track 'em by smell, They must know it. Animals have ways of knowin' things. I had an old rat in mye my cellar once, I had the goddamndest time tryin, to trap. He sprang every trap I ever laid for him, but I finally got him. I concealed that trap so good you wouldn't have knowed it was there. When I see I finally got him, I felt kind of sorry, he give me such a run for my money.

"Rat's'll come around where's there's chickens every time. [] If you was to start a chicken farm 'way up on that hill up there, you'd have rats galore the day after you put your chickens in.

"Old Ben Sutcliffe, used to live over in Greystone, had a slew of chickens. I was up to his place one time and I noticed all the cats he had around. Ben says to me, "Them cats is worth three-four hundred dollars a year apiece to me. I figure they save me that much every year.'

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"He never fed 'em very much. They had to go out and get their dinner. Get themselves a nicy nice big fat rat. The most Ben would ever do for 'em would be give 'em a little milk at milkin' time."

From the little table near the window Mr. Botsford takes his tobacco humidor, loads his blackened pipe. "I been smokin' this tobacco for more than twenty years," he says. "I smoke cigarettes now and then, but mostly the pipe.

"Started smokin' when I was fourteen or fifteen. I smoked cigars for a long time, then cigarettes. I got so I was smokin' too much. I had a job at the Waterbury Clock shop for a few mouths and I was boardin' up at a place in North Square. Well, I used to come home from work and go up in the room and smoke a cigarette while I was washin' up for supper. After a while I'd be smokin' two or three cigarettes before supper, and God only knows how many after.

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"I got so's I couldn't sleep nights. I used to wake up and turn and toss. Too many cigarettes. Finally one night I got up and took the cigarettes -- they used to come in a long, flat box, and fired the damn things right out the window. Didn't smoke cigarettes again for a long time.

"Most everybody smoked cigars in the old days. Smokin' was more of a ritual then, you kind of could take your time about it. When I went out west I carried a couple of boxes of them with me. Made right over in Hartford. [Anecdote?] [?]

"And that reminds me of a story. You know, Connecticut is a great little state ./ in the Union. Well, I was sittin' on the verandy of 4 a hotel in St. Louis and there was a lot of other fellers there. It was a warm day and the lobby was corwded crowded and a bunch of us was sittin' out on the verandy.

"We got talkin' back and forth and tellin' where we come from and all, and there was a feller there from Kansas, he started to lay it into me for comin' from such a little bit of a state. I says, 'Listen here, Mister. You come from Kansas don't you,' I says, 'My brother is a land broker, out there. He's a Connecticut boy. He's lent money to half the people in his county,' I says. 'Why your whole goddam state is mortgaged to New England,' I says, 'and Connecticut is holdin' half the mortgages.

"Look at the buttons on your coat,' I says. 'Ten to one they were made in Waterbury. You're smokin' a cigar right now that was manufactured in Hartford. You got a dollar watch in your pocket. Where was that made, Waterbury. I says, 'the bed you slept on last night had a mattress that was made down in Bridgeport.' I kept giving it to him like that for ten minutes. 'Don't go braggin' to me about that God-forsaken mudhole you call a state,' I says. 'I come from a real state.' I had more comeback in me them days than I got now. Well, that feller finally got up and walked into the hotel. The other fellers were laughin' to beat the band.

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"Well, it's the truth. I spent more than three months in Kansas, and I was glad to get home. They were nice people, and I had a goot time, but it wasn't like Connecticut. Of course that was fifty years ago. I don't know what it's like now, I never been back.

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"About all they did for amusement was go out on the prairie huntin.' Ride along with a gun or a revolver and see what you could find to shoot at. My cousin and me was out one day with a team of two horses, and all to once the one on the off side commenced to shy. I says, what's the matter,' My cousin says, 'Rattlesnake. ' He grabbed the revolver and fired three shots back into the bushes. Then he took a wagon wrench and heaved it in. Then he got the horsewhip and went back and started fishin' around and pretty soon he dragged out the snake. Four feet long, if it was an inch, and as thick as your arm. It had three bullet holes in it, too, where my cousin hit it. He was a goot shot. We cut the rattles off it, and took them home.

"Used to be a lot of prairie chickens and prairie dogs to shoot. And once we was ridin' along and we saw an antelope. My cousin said it was the first one he'd ever seen himself. One time we was ridin' along and I says to him, 'Look there,' I says, 'There's a big shepherd dog runnin' along beside us.' My cousin looked, and he says, 'Shepherd dog hell, that's a wolf.' I grabbed the revolver and took a shot at it. I must have hit it on the back -- just skinned it -- because I could see the fur fly. You should've seen that animal run.

"They all carried guns out there, then. I carried one myself all the time I was there. You never could tell what you'd see to shoot at. Snakes especially.

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"That's one thing we ain't blessed with much here in Connecticut, is rattlesnakes. I never see but one, in my life, caught around here, but they say there's quite a few of them over on the other side of the river.

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"There's my paper boy. I been takin' this paper for over fifty years. Don't know how many paper boys I had. The other day this feller left a Waterbury Democrat. I wouldn't even take it in. Left it out on the verandy. Not that I have any objection to the politics of it, understand -- that ain't the reason. I just don't like the paper. I went down town and got me an American.

"You get used to one paper and you don't want any other. I know where to find things in the American. I know where the radio news is, and where the Thomaston news is and the business section and all. I don't want to Waterbury Democrat. Nor no other paper."